

2009 Review of Books

Well, it's time for my annual look back thru the books I read this year. (Previously: [2006](#), [2007](#), [2008](#).) I've included links to reviews, where I have them, and italicized the titles of the books I recommend without reservation.

On Writing Well ([3](#))

This book is really dreadful, mostly because the author actually cannot write well.

[*The Power Broker*](#) ([5](#))

I cannot possibly say enough good things about this book. Go read it. Right now. Yes, I know it's long, but trust me, you'll wish it was longer. I think it may be simply the best nonfiction book.

On Directing Film ([4](#))

Not just a great book about directing, but a great book about *writing*.

[*The Sources of Social Power, Vol. 2*](#)

Not an easy book, but Michael Mann continues to amaze.

[*The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*](#)

If Feynman was a sociologist, this is probably the book he'd write. A delightful little thing.

[*American Apartheid*](#)

This book is criminally under-publicized. Everyone has their own crazy theories about why it is that blacks are disadvantaged in our society. Massey and Denton show it's much more obvious than any of that: they're victims of extreme segregation, with all the negative effects that entails. An absolutely brilliant book.

[*The Path to Power*](#)

After you finish *The Power Broker*, if you want more, read this.

[*The Liberal Defence of Murder*](#)

This book is like a little miracle. I'm not even sure how to describe it, except to say that it turns one's understanding of history completely upside-down.

[*Categorically Unequal*](#)

If you're interested in inequality, this little overview is the place to start.

[*The Fox and the Hedgehog*](#)

Absolutely delightful.

[*Angler*](#)

Great introduction to how to use "the bureaucracy" and Cheney's utter deviousness.

[*Showdown at Gucci Gulch*](#)

Best book I've found on how positive bills actually get passed.

[*Reason & Persuasion: Three Dialogues by Plato*](#)

Great fun.

Bat Boy: The Musical

If you ever get a chance, go see it. It's the greatest musical ever.

[*Bad Samaritans*](#)

The best introduction to the real issues of globalization and international development.

[*Nemesis*](#)

A wonderful book for anyone interested in how science is actually done. ([chapter 1](#), [chapters 2-4](#))

[*Gaming the Vote*](#)

Poundstone's really become an amazing writer. While this isn't as good as [Fortune's Formula](#) it really is quite fun. Poundstone takes a rather novel tack in making the argument for voting system reform. Instead of saying that it will allow for third-parties to get a fair hearing, he argues it will protect the major parties from the insidious effect of spoilers.

Furthermore, instead of IRV, Approval, or even Condorcet voting, he endorses Range Voting as the best voting system, arguing against Condorcet on some weird grounds about determinant ballots that just doesn't make sense to me (p. 226).

Both of these seem reasonable when Poundstone lays them out, but are totally insane upon further inspection. Voting reform may protect against spoilers in the short-term, but in the long term it'll likely doom us to some kind of fractured multiparty system. (That's not to say it's a bad thing.) And range voting, like its proponents, is totally batshit insane. (He even passes on their ridiculous claims about it being better than democracy with a straight face.)

Let's think about this for a second. Strategic voting with a range ballot (which even range voting's proponents say they'll do) is simply approval voting (plus maybe some meaningless nursery effect — if you want that, just have a nonbinding approval box or something). So for the system to work, it depends on people voting astrategically. But obviously those people's votes will count less than strategic votes. So range voting's only advantage over approval voting is that it counts the votes of naive voters less. How is that fair?

I think the Range Voting comparison with Condorcet is rigged; you'll notice they never provide any explanation for why their supposedly strategic Condorcet behavior is actually strategic. And the only strategic Condorcet behavior Poundstone provides is trying to create a tie to force it into sequential dropping, which seems wildly implausible in a real-life scenario. So it still seems Condorcet outperforms them all.

[If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?](#)

I really enjoyed this book. It starts with a simple thought experiment: imagine you had a long-lost identical twin who grew up in a conservative home and became a conservative. You, by contrast, grew up in a liberal home and became a liberal. Wouldn't meeting him make you question your beliefs? And thus, shouldn't the possibility that you *could* meet him make you question your beliefs? (I'm not totally convinced by this; my beliefs are much more shaken by converts — people who were strong believers in X but converted to believing in Y.)

From this, Cohen heads to a reminiscence of his own upbringing, which I found especially touching, perhaps because he has the identity I wish I had: a Canadian communist in an antireligious Yiddish-speaking home. In the middle there's a good bit on Hegel, Marx, and why not to heighten the contradictions, and he concludes by refuting Rawls with the same argument Matt Yglesias used on Kent Conrad: Rawls says that in a just society, everyone would embrace the Difference Principle, but the Difference Principle allows for differences because some people will work harder if they get more, but if those people embrace the principle then why wouldn't they give their money to the poor and embrace egalitarianism? He ends by addressing the title question and accepting a sort of Yglesian approach to politics: an overriding concern with the structure of political institutions, but also a strong sense of moral demands for people to achieve the best they can within existing structures.

Finally, it got me wondering: a lot of Marx (and, I would add, Keynes) thinks about the future as some sort of society where industrial products give us abundance and economic laws loosen their hold on us. The industrial revolution didn't do that, but perhaps the post-scarcity technological future might?

And my first book of the new year is Daniel Ellsberg's [Secrets](#), which I'm already loving.

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